

## ASPIRATION FOR CONTEMPORARY STANDARDS OF PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS BY ADOLESCENT BOYS – PSYCHOSOCIAL AND HEALTH CONTEXTS

Aleksandra WIETESKA<sup>1\*</sup>, Joanna KUCHARIEWICZ<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Psychology, University of Silesia; aleksandra.wieteska@us.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-2879-2528

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Psychology, University of Silesia; joanna.kucharewicz@us.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-6957-1782

\* Correspondence author

**Abstract:** Attractive appearance and athletic figure is an important element of presenting oneself in social interactions. Nowadays, for men and adolescent boys, the model of physical attractiveness is a muscular body with a wide chest and broad shoulders and a narrow waist. Modelling one's body in accordance with applicable standards has become possible due to the services related to body care, diets and fitness. The authors' own research presents the importance of the influence of peers on taking physical exercises and a proper diet in order to get an athletic body by adolescent boys. The article also presents the health problems of young people and young men associated with dissatisfaction with the appearance and striving to have a muscular body.

**Keywords:** body change behaviours among adolescent boys, physical activity, sociocultural influences on body.

### 1. Introduction

In Poland, as in the Western Europe (Germany, Great Britain, France, Spain, Italy), an increase in physical activity and the use of fitness clubs has been noted (Tomkowska, 2018). Nowadays, physical activity is a form of caring for one's own health and a way to boost one's well-being and achieve a socially desirable slim and athletic body. Body modelling plays an increasingly important role in one's social self-presentation and is possible thanks to the development of services related to body care, fitness, dieting and plastic surgery (Shiling, 2010).

The pursuit for contemporary ideals of beauty preoccupies not only women but men as well. Adolescent boys are aware of modern standards of attractiveness and want to strive for them (Riccardelli, McCabe, 2001). For boys, the model of attractiveness is a muscular body with

a wide chest, broad shoulders and a narrow waist. For girls, the ideal they want to strive for is a woman with a slim body (Riccardelli, McCabe, 2001). Attending fitness clubs by adolescent boys and young men can be motivated by the desire to improve their own physical attractiveness. Studies prove that boys experience higher dissatisfaction with their appearance when their weight is below or above average body weight (Field et al., 2001; Furnham, Calnan, 1998; Mäkinen et al., 2012; McCabe, Ricciardelli, 2001; Presnel, Bearman, Stice, 2004) They want to have a larger body mass and a more muscular body (Drewnowski et al., 1995; Furnham, and Calnan, 1998; Ricciardelli, McCabe, 2001). Studies by Ricciardelli and McCabe (2001) showed that about 30% of boys wanted to change their body size. According to a study by Ala, Ludden and Lally (2007), 30% of the surveyed adolescent boys with average body weight would like to have a more muscular figure. In turn, in studies conducted by Adrian Furnham and Alison Calnan (1998), as many as 69% of adolescent boys expressed dissatisfaction with their appearance because they judged that their bodies were far from perfect. The confrontation of adolescent boys with modern standards of attractiveness may not only cause dissatisfaction with their own appearance, but also be a source of unrealistic expectations about the appearance of peers and cause criticism of the look of people who do not meet cultural norms of appearance (Eisenberg et al., 2003; Jones et al., 2004; McCabe, Ricciardelli, 2005). Research shows that the criticism of appearance most often concerns people who are overweight and obese (Eisenberg et al., 2003; Thompson et al., 2007). There are many potential mechanisms of peer influence on adolescents' body image. A direct form of peer influence is the criticism of appearance and teasing because of body weight and shape deviating from modern beauty standards. By criticising appearance, young people can exert pressure upon their peers to alter their body and match their social expectations. Peers are also the subjects of active social comparisons in the area of appearance. Festinger's Social Comparison theory (1954) assumes that people shape their self-esteem and self-knowledge through comparisons with other people. "Down" comparisons cause a positive perception of yourself, while "up" comparisons give a negative effect. Sources of comparisons can be universal and distant, such as models and celebrities, and particularistic ones, such as family and friends. Adolescent boys and men also compare their appearance with the body images of models presented in the media, in particular in the social media (Heinberg, Thompson, 1992; Bair et al., 2012; Lorenzen, Grieve, Thomas, 2004). Adolescent boys can actively criticise others, as well as compare their bodies with athletes and actors, and have a sense of being evaluated by peers through the prism of the existing canons of beauty (Morrison, Kalin, Morison, 2004; Ricciardelli, McCabe, Banfield, 2000). Another way to influence one's peers may be complimenting the muscular body, which is the effect of exercising in the gym, and advising peers to follow a proper diet and exercise which can help you achieve a desired figure. The space in which an exchange of opinions about the appearance obtained as the result of exercises occurs are not only sports clubs, but also online forums (Juerez, Soto, Prichard, 2012).

## 2. Methodology of authors' own research

Original research presents the impact of peer-criticism and internalised criticism of appearance, as well as complimenting the appearance and internalised positive opinions of peers on the use of slimming therapy and physical exercise by adolescent boys. Taking up a slimming treatment and exercise are a way for boys to achieve athletic body that meets modern male body standards. This study was part of a larger project that examined the effects of various variables (peer support and criticism) on boys' applications of body change methods. The statistical model used to examine the impact of these variables was the correlation-regression model. For statistical calculations, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) using the Kruskal Wallis method was used.

The following research questions were formulated:

- Does peer criticism contribute to adolescent boys undergoing slimming treatment more frequently?
- Does complimenting the appearance contribute to adolescent boys undergoing slimming treatment more frequently?
- Does internalised peer criticism contribute to adolescent boys undergoing slimming therapy more frequently?
- Do the internalised positive opinions of peers contribute to adolescent boys undergoing slimming therapy?
- Does peer criticism result in the fact that adolescent boys exercise more often?
- Does complimenting the appearance result in the fact that adolescent boys exercise more often?
- Does internalised peer criticism result in the fact that adolescent boys exercise more often?
- Do internalised positive peer opinions result in the fact that adolescent boys exercise more often?

These questions related separately to the group of boys in early adolescence and boys in late adolescence.

The research group consisted of 96 boys aged 13-15 and 115 boys and young men aged 18-20. The respondents came from various cities of Silesian Voivodeship: Katowice, Chorzów, Gliwice, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Piekary Śląskie, and Będzin. The subjects were students of junior high schools, high schools and technical secondary schools. The research questions and statistical analyses were applied separately to the group of boys in early adolescence and boys in late adolescence.

The following research tools were used in the study: The Scale of Using Methods for Improving the Appearance by Alicja Głębocka (Głębocka, 2009) – to study body change methods, Peer Criticism Perception Questionnaire – to study the perception of peer criticism

(using a visual criticism scale) and perception of peer complimenting (using visual complimenting scale) and the Internalised Criticism Questionnaire – to study internalised peer-criticism and internalised positive peer feedback on appearance.

### The results of the study

Table 1 presents the effect of variables on boys undergoing slimming treatments. In the group of boys in early adolescence, the predictor of undergoing slimming treatment more frequently was the criticism of appearance while in boys in late adolescence – peers complimenting on their appearance.

**Table 1.**

*Significant predictors of adolescents undergoing slimming therapy*

<b>Boys aged 13-15</b>			
R = 0.479, R <sup>2</sup> = 0.230 F (5,90) = 5.385, p<0.00			
	<b>β</b>	<b>t (93)</b>	<b>p</b>
Criticism of appearance by peers	0.261	2.54	0.013
<b>Boys aged 18-20</b>			
R= 0.27, R <sup>2</sup> = 0.073 F (3.110) = 2.895, p<0.038			
	<b>β</b>	<b>t (108)</b>	<b>p</b>
Complimenting the appearance	0.461	4.22	0.001

Table 2 presents the effect of variables on boys taking up physical exercise aimed at improving their appearance. In the group of boys in early adolescence, the predictor of more frequent exercise were positive peer opinions on their appearance while in boys in late adolescence - complimenting their appearance by peers.

**Table 2.**

*Significant predictors of physical exercises aimed at improving the appearance of adolescents*

<b>Boys aged 13-15</b>			
R= 0.263, R <sup>2</sup> = 0.069 F (2.93) = 3.470, p<0.035			
	<b>β</b>	<b>t (93)</b>	<b>p</b>
Internalised positive feedback from peers	0.238	2.369	0.02
<b>Boys aged 18-20</b>			
R= 0.27, R <sup>2</sup> = 0.073 F (3.110) = 2.895, p<0.038			
	<b>β</b>	<b>t (108)</b>	<b>p</b>
Complimenting the appearance	0.468	3.34	0.001

### 3. The discussion on the results

Criticising peers' appearance was a predictor of boys in early adolescence undergoing slimming treatment. These dependencies are probably two-way. Boys who deviate from the social standards are criticised, e.g. they are overweight, do not have wide chest and developed muscles (Fredman, 1990; McCabe, Ricciardelli, 2004). These boys are often not popular in the

group and have more depressive symptoms than their peers. Moreover, studies by Ata, Ludden and Lally (2007) showed that adolescents with low self-esteem clearly perceived criticism from both friends and parents, and under its influence engaged in practices aimed at altering their body weight. Criticising at the initial stage of adolescence may incline this group to change their appearance. However, attention should be drawn to the fact that this group of young people would require the support of adults and specialists to succeed in losing weight. According to Festinger's Social Comparison theory (1954), people who are criticised may be checking whether their appearance matches other social norms in the scope of physical attractiveness. They can be more focused on their body image and will more often seek to change it in order to meet social expectations.

Internalised positive feedback from peers was a predictor of the application of physical exercises to improve physical appearance in boys in early adolescence. Complimenting the appearance by peers was a strong predictor of slimming therapy and exercise to improve appearance in boys in late adolescence. It can be assumed that peers' compliments about the appearance play the role of a motivator for adapting the appearance to applicable beauty standards. The motives related to self-image and desire to maintain positive self-esteem are responsible for changing one's own appearance. Compliments from colleagues are an external gratification for the attempts made by individuals to change their body and while they are there - they constitute the motive for further action (Łukaszewski, 2003). The obtained results on the positive role of compliments in shaping boys' body image suggest that modern boys can talk to each other about body muscles. Possibly, in their discussions about their appearance, apart from critical remarks, boys are also focused on praise and admiration of muscular and athletic body (Johnes et al., 2004; Johnes, Crawford, 2006). An example of such conversations between men are messages exchanged on online sports forums. In the case of overweight and obese boys, it can be assumed that positive opinions of peers regarding changes in the appearance resulting from training can have a positive role and encourage further physical activity. Compliments from peers motivate them to further change their appearance through slimming therapy and physical exercises.

Compliments from peers can also play a negative role, strengthen the focus on the body and cause adolescents at the threshold of adulthood to overestimate the importance of physical appeal and the need to adapt their appearance to socio-cultural patterns of attractiveness at the cost of risking their health. Studies on the body image of boys in late adolescence and young men show that excessive focus on their physicality and behaviour consisting in pursuing muscularity are associated with low self-esteem and mood disorders, development of muscular dysmorphia and the use of anabolic steroids (Fields et al, 2001; Bratland-Sanda, Sundgot-Borgen, 2012; Fields et al., 2001; Olivardia et al., 2004; Pope, Philips, Olivardia, 2000; McCabe, Ricciardelli, 2004).

To summarise, positive peer messages on the appearance can play a protective role in developing body image by adolescent boys. Engaging in fit culture, encouraging peers to exercise by admiring their body can have an impact on improving physical condition, increase physical well-being and satisfaction with their own body, as well as constitute a source of pleasant emotions resulting from belonging to a peer group. However, we should also bear in mind possible negative consequences of excessive and pathological focus on the body, which may lead to the development of muscular dysmorphia, exercise dependence and the use of anabolic steroids (Bratland-Sanda, Sundgot-Borgen, 2012; Einsenberg, 2012; McCreary, and Sasse, 2000; Olivardia et al., 2000, 2004; Pope et al., 1997; Pope, Philips, Olivardia, 2000).

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